

The following letter was sent to President Obama on January 14, 2011:

The President
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

I write today on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to convey our appreciation for your recent statement condemning the violence in Egypt and Nigeria, as well as to urge you to raise religious freedom issues during the visit of Chinese President Hu Jintao.

The Commission has followed events in Egypt and Nigeria for many years. We welcomed your call for the attackers in Egypt to be “brought to justice for this barbaric and heinous act.” The Commission has found that in Egypt serious problems of discrimination, intolerance, and other human rights violations against members of religious minorities, as well as disfavored Muslims, remain widespread. The past year marked a significant upsurge in violence targeting Coptic Orthodox Christians. In Nigeria, the government continues to respond inadequately and ineffectively to recurrent communal and sectarian violence. Years of inaction by Nigeria’s federal, state and local governments has created a climate of impunity, resulting in thousands of deaths, which is why USCIRF recommended Nigeria be named a “country of particular concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act. Sustained engagement by the United States on both of these issues will be critical.

Mr. President, your remarks on the violence against religious minorities in Egypt and Nigeria helped to underscore the importance of making international freedom of religion a priority. Hopefully, you will have occasion at the State of the Union or some other forum to speak to

these countries again and reinforce the idea that religious extremism must be combated both by bringing offenders to justice and eliminating discriminatory and repressive state laws that stoke the flames of intolerance.

As you prepare to meet with President Hu Jintao next week, we respectfully urge you to speak publicly about why religious freedom is in China's interest, rooted in international human rights treaties and standards which China has affirmed. In the past, USCIRF welcomed your eloquent statements before the U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue about why religious freedom is an important American interest, fundamental to our nation's history. We hope you will use this opportunity with Chinese leaders to detail the tangible diplomatic, political, social welfare, security, and economic benefits China can gain by fully protecting and promoting religious freedom and related human rights, and also explain the costs of continued repression and religious freedom abuses to the future growth and flexibility of U.S.-China relations.

The U.S. cannot ignore China's continued repression of dissent in the hopes of finding common ground on other important global concerns. U.S. policy and statements should reflect the fact that human rights protections and the advancement of the rule of law are critically intertwined with many of our national interests with China. The Commission would welcome the opportunity to discuss with you these and other issues.

Sincerely,
Leonard Leo
Chair

CC: Samantha Power, Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights
Jeff Bader, Senior Director for East Asia
Michelle Gavin, Senior Director for Africa
Sergio Aguirre, Director for Levant and North Africa
Joshua DuBois, Executive Director of the Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships

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